

Partners willing to bend with relationship 'dealbreakers,' study finds

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Romantic dealbreakers, like laziness and living too far away, may be "dealbenders" when it comes to committed relationships.

A new study, inventively designed by Western psychologists Nicolyn Charlot and Samantha Joel as a 'choose-your-own-adventure' revealed one romantic relationship problem may not be enough to call it quits but problems add up over time, eventually turning dealbenders into a dealbreaker.

The findings were published this week in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

"People typically think of dealbreakers as hard-and-fast bits of information that would make someone automatically end a relationship. But our findings suggest that many [relationship issues](#) considered dealbreakers may not actually make people exit relationships right away," said Charlot, a Western social psychology Ph.D. candidate.

In the study, participants viewed a series of story scenarios about a new relationship. Dealbreakers were randomly assigned to be present or not, and participants were given the option to end the relationship or proceed after each scenario. The result: it usually took several potential dealbreakers before participants were willing to leave.

"We decided 'dealbenders' would be a more appropriate term for these negative pieces of information," said Charlot. "They're things that give you pause but may not make you end the relationship unless you also encounter other dealbenders."

Deal or no deal

The study showed men and women largely agreed on which traits are dealbreakers. Primary examples include the partner having a "disheveled" or "unclean" appearance, lacking a sense of humor, living too far away, being lazy, and disagreeing whether to have children.

Charlot believes the study shows that people want a lot from a partner, and that includes big-ticket items, like trust and dependability. But day-to-day things that might not seem like a big deal, really matter too.

"Does your partner keep clean? Do they take an interest in what you care about? You need to be able to trust your partner, but you also need them to smell good," said Charlot.

As for the hard-and-fast romantic relationship dealbreakers, it depends on who you ask.

"Everyone has their own personal dealbreakers, but the ones in our research that most frequently made people end the hypothetical relationships were: having a partner who didn't want to be exclusive/monogamous; had anger issues; wasn't receptive to interests; or had bad hygiene," said Charlot. "And those align pretty well with what people say their dealbreakers are, which means people seem to have a good sense of what they want and don't want in relationships."

A key caveat of the study is that these are completely hypothetical relationships, Joel said.

"Tracking people in brand-new relationships as they develop in real time is expensive and time-consuming," said Joel, a Western psychology professor who studies how people make decisions in [romantic relationships](#). "We think choose-your-own-adventure narratives are a cost-effective technique for capturing relationship development in an iterative, immersive way—more so than one-shot vignettes, for example—while also retaining experimental control."

The researcher pointed out the choose-your-own-adventure design still has its limitations. Participants' decisions aren't swayed by the strong feelings that would arise in the context of real relationships.

"Participants don't get a chance to probe the issues further, such as by asking exactly how different the political beliefs of their [partner](#) were. But, in exchange for that, you can randomize what the partners do and say, and how the relationship unfolds, in a way that you can't when examining real relationships," said Charlot.

Before the study, Joel and Charlot suspected that people wouldn't leave a [relationship](#) on the first dealbreaker, but they were surprised to see most people stick around for about four dealbreakers before calling it quits.

"People often say they would never date someone with different political beliefs but when you're presented with a whole person and that's just one facet of their personality, things aren't as black-and-white," said Charlot. "You may choose to stick it out anyway, unless you also notice other issues."

More information: Samantha Joel, Nicolyn Charlot, Dealbreakers, or dealbenders? Capturing the cumulative effects of partner information on mate choice, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2022). doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2022.104328

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